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SUBJECT: PRESIDENTS PARTY TO SUPPORT PM'S SMER-SD IN UPCOMING
ELECTIONS

¶1. (SBU) Summary. The Movement for Democracy (known by its Slovak acronym "HZD") - a party founded by current Slovak President Ivan Gasparovic in 2002 after an acrimonious split with HZDS, the party led by his longtime political partner and autocratic former PM Vladimir Meciar - announced its withdrawal from the June 12 general elections in favor of Smer-SD, the strongest party in the current ruling coalition and the clear front runner in all polls. The move has been widely predicted since Gasparovic was re-elected to a second term with strong support from Smer-SD in Spring 2009. End summary.

¶2. (U) At the HZD party congress on February 20, attended by Prime Minister Robert Fico, and President Gasparovic - who remained Honorary Chairperson despite the traditionally non-partisan function of his office, delegates voted unanimously to cooperate with Smer-SD in putting together a list of candidates for the June Parliamentary elections. HZD's titular Chairman, Jozef Grapa, told media he is confident Smer-SD's list will include some HZD members. Grapa added that the HZD presidium will now make arrangements to amalgamate HZD into Smer-SD.

¶3. (U) Gasparovic founded HZD in 2002, after he was omitted from the HZDS candidate list for parliamentary elections in 2002. (Gasparovic had previously been considered Vladimir Meciar's right hand, serving as Speaker of Parliament from 1994-1998, during the period that led former Secretary Albright to deride Slovakia as "the black hole of Europe.") In 2002 HZD failed to get the five percent of valid votes cast necessary to enter Parliament, although they exceeded the three percent required for state funding. In 2002 HZD was widely credited with making a second Dzurinda government possible by siphoning votes from HZDS.

¶4. (SBU) In 2004, after over-confident center-right voters failed to turn out for the first round of the Presidential election, Gasparovic shocked the political establishment by taking second place to Meciar. In a second round of voting, and with grudging support from many who found him to be the lesser of two evils, Gasparovic defeated Meciar with nearly 60 percent of the vote. It was the first, last and only electoral success for HZD.

¶5. (U) During the 2009 presidential campaign Gasparovic ran as an independent with support from HZD, Smer-SD and the Slovak National Party (SNS). Nonetheless, a film of Gasparovic speaking to a group of Smer functionaries became public in which he said, "We're here alone, so I can say, that in this position and at this time I'm practically like a member [of Smer-SD], because my failure will be the failure of Smer and my success will be the success of Smer and, of course, the whole coalition."

¶6. (U) Speaking at the HZD congress, PM Fico said Smer-SD will welcome all HZD members who choose to enter his party. HZD has 2,200 registered members.

¶7. (SBU) COMMENT: The amalgamation of HZD - and effectively of

the Slovak President - with Fico's Smer is the latest act in a 12-year old drama that began when a broad coalition of "democratic forces" united to oust the autocratic Prime Minister Meciar after the 1998 elections. Although Meciar's party gained the largest percentage of valid votes cast in 1998, his opponents - with support from Western countries that publicly and privately said Slovakia would never join the EU or NATO while Meciar was in charge - were able to create a coalition that excluded him. At that moment many of Meciar's financial supporters, including businesspeople who, it is said, were "given permission to become rich" under the rule of Meciar (and Gasparovic), began looking for a new candidate and party to back. Many of them chose a successful young lawyer from Topolcany, Robert Fico, who failed to get a ministerial position in the new government despite being the star of the reformed Communist party (the Party of the Democratic Left, known in Slovak as "SDL"). With their backing, Fico started Smer in 1999, which became Smer-SD after its merger with SDL in 2005. END COMMENT.

EDDINS